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ABSTRACT

One year after the 1982 school board elections in the Ottawa-Carleton (Ontario) region, an indepth followup study was conducted of the 25 new board members to determine: (1) the nature of their election strategies; (2) the degree of their success in implementing election promises; (3) the degree of their socialization during the first year in office by role expectation, experienced school board members, and the administration; and (4) what communication links had been established with the community, ministry of education officials, interest groups, municipal politicians, and members of the provincial legislature. The interview schedule was developed after a review of recent Canadian studies of school board member recruitment and socialization, and personal interviews were conducted with each new board member. This paper reports, in detail, the many factors contributing to success of board members in each of the areas of inquiry. New board members appeared, as a group, to be considerably well organized, politically astute, highly motivated, and willing to spend monies to get elected. Most were able to demonstrate successful implementation of some campaign promises (described in rank order of popularity); most demonstrated sophistication in a variety of matters of administration socialization; and most placed a high priority on improving and continuing communication with the electorate. (IW)

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How successful was their first year as new school board members?

by
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EDITOR'S NOTE

This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in New Orleans, April 23, 1984

INTRODUCTION

Although school board elections generally create little interest, a record number of new candidates in the Ottawa-Carleton region of Canada's capital ran for election as school board members in November, 1982. They opposed fifty-six incumbents for sixty-eight seats on the four large school boards within the region. These 146 candidates represented an increase of forty-two percent since the 1980 elections and the highest number of candidates ever to run for the two public and two separate school boards which had been created by the Province of Ontario's move to larger administrative units in 1969.

During the three-week campaign period following the closing of nominations and the elections, an attempt was made to contact the ninety new candidates to determine why they ran for public office. Sixty-three (70%) of the candidates were interviewed and the findings reported (Jakes, 1983, pp.18–22). Although it was assumed that recent increases in honoraria and term of office were principal reasons for the increase, the data analysis did not provide support. The main reasons, in rank order were: lack of communication by the boards; monetary and taxation concerns; school closure; special education; quality education; and public funding of Catholic education (pp. 20–21).

One year later in November 1983, an attempt was made to contact the twenty-three new board members who were elected to office and two others who were acclaimed. The objectives for this in-depth follow-up to the original survey of all new candidates were to determine 1) what successful election strategies were used that resulted in a victory over forty-five other new candidates and the defeat of eleven incumbents 2) their success or lack of success in implementing their election promises 3) the degree of their socialization during the first year in office by role expectation, experienced school board members and the administration, and because communication had been the primary reason given for the candidacy of the majority of candidates 4) what communication links during the first year had been established with the community, interest groups, ministry of education officials, municipal politicians, and members of the provincial legislature.

METHODOLOGY

Because of an interest in school board elections, six graduate students in educational administration studying politics of education with the researcher during the 1983 Fall semester volunteered to assist him to review the literature, to develop the questions for the structured interview schedule, to conduct the in-depth interviews, and to analyze the data for this follow-up study with the successful new board members after one year in office.

Although a considerable amount of literature was reviewed, the rationale used in the development of the questions for the structured interviews came primarily from Canadian studies. These included a comprehensive survey of 220 candidates for school board on the Island of Montreal (Townsend and Craig, 1978), a study of school board member recruitment (Cistone, 1974), and

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an investigation of school board member socialization (Cistone, 1977).

The Montreal researchers developed a bilingual questionnaire which was suited to a Canadian sample and utilized the "big picture" and the sequencing of the Lutz-Iannaccone model and its application by Levine and Cuttitta where individual assets such as "time" invested during the campaign were added. Building on these models, Townsend and Craig posed questions that uncovered other elements and they constructed a model of electoral dynamics comprising thirteen factors which influenced voter support (p. 324). Utilizing their model, the thirteen factors of candidate potential became the framework within which questions for the first part of the structured interview schedule were developed for this study and they included: money spent on the campaign; group membership in community organizations; group endorsement; slate or individual promotion; use of a campaign manager; information sources; unexpected campaign events; level of emphasis, for example, on provincial or local issues; special groups of voters as targets; and the extent of media utilization. Because the questions in all of these dimensions only demanded a "Yes" or "No" answer, all responses were probed further by asking "Why?" The successful candidates were then asked to indicate the three factors which seemed to be most significant to their success, whether they would alter their election strategies during a subsequent election campaign and, after one year in office, whether they would run for re-election in 1985.

In the construction of the second part of the interview schedule, brochures, newspaper advertisements, and media coverage of the candidates were examined and election promises by them identified. These were reviewed with the novice board members and any other personal election promises that had been made were elicited from them. Clarification was sought to determine whether the promises were only verbal or written, or both. Using a scale of 1 (no success) to 5 (complete success), they were asked to indicate the degree of success they had achieved with each promise and whether successful implementation was dependent upon its political popularity, a backing of it by interest groups, assistance from experienced board members, administration support, media coverage, familiarity with board procedures, or whether their promise had already been under consideration by the board.

Part three of the interview schedule investigated the phenomenon of role socialization. Cistone (1977), claims that socialization is a process by which novice members become role incumbents because they have selectively acquired the values, attitudes, interests, dispositions, skills and knowledge of the group in which they have become members (p. 19). Although the main focus for this investigation was socialization of the incumbents by administration, he also inquired into informal school board norms, friendly relationships among the board members, and reciprocity by means of trading votes (p. 27). An attempt was made in this study to determine the degree to which the role incumbents had been socialized by developing questions to investigate formal or informal contacts initiated between: board members and the chief executive officer; board members and other administrative officials; and board members with other board members. In order to determine the degree of their socialization, this contact was measured by ranking the responses on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (more) to 3 (some) to 5 (regular). Additional probing questions were asked concerning voting patterns, agreement with colleagues, support of administration's recommendations, private or public criticism of colleagues, role expectation, and applied sanctions. In addition, nine beliefs concerning board cohesion and corporate unity were investigated and responses were measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (not important) to 5 (very important).

How the new board members initiated or maintained contact and communication links with the community, municipal officials, ministry of education, local members of the provincial legislature, and special interest groups was investigated in the past part of the interview schedule. Because communication had been a principal reason for their candidacy, the incumbents were asked how they thought communication between the school board and the general public and parents could be improved.

The development of the interview schedule was a major task and all questions were reviewed with former school board members and board chairmen, revised, rewritten and tested several times for clarity, intent, and reality. Each of the research assistants conducted three or four two-hour in-depth interviews with the respondents. These interviews were usually conducted in the board member's home or at a location convenient to both parties. Answer sheets were completed during the course of the interview. Although it can be argued that interviews are best conducted by one researcher, the interview schedule was highly structured, all of the interviewers had participated in its construction, and the data analysis was conducted cooperatively. In the analysis, consensus was required on several of the item responses and, meeting together, the research assistants listed the responses, classified them, reported them, and commented on the findings.

FINDINGS

Twenty-five (37%) of the sixty-eight successful candidates in the November, 1982 elections included twenty-three who were newly elected and two who were acclaimed to the four school boards in the Ottawa-Carleton region for the 1983–85 three-year term of office. Four of them, however, had been elected previously with two of them returning to the same board after an absence, and two former separate school board members running successfully as separate school representatives on a public board of education. The researchers were able to contact twenty-three of the twenty-five new members and, of that number, two refused to be interviewed, five were female, sixteen were male, eighteen were first-time in-

cumbents and three were new to the board but had been elected previously.

Part I: Election Strategies

The two board members acclaimed to office did not respond to this section. The answers from the three who were elected previously did not diverge significantly from the responses by the novices and their comments were included in the listing and classification analysis. Under the highest classification of "Organization and Money", the five most frequently used strategies considered most helpful in winning included 1) the use of committed endorsers, family members, friends, and other workers 2) meet-the-candidates' nights 3) brochures 4) door-to-door campaigning and 5) present or former membership in community organizations. The least most helpful strategies utilized were coffee parties and newspaper, radio or television advertising. Media advertising is very expensive and, without a funding base from political party endorsement, it becomes a luxury that very few candidates for school board can afford.

When asked which three campaign strategies helped them most, the highest five reported were brochures and lawn signs, local community support, special newspaper election supplements, friends and endorsers, and personal canvassing. Four others emerged from the data when the respondents were asked to describe additional strategies which they had used effectively. Most common among them appeared to be an emphasis on their surname in ethnic, linguistic, or religious communities. Some felt that their attacks on an incumbent's stand concerning unpopular community issues such as school closure led to their election and the incumbent's defeat. Others regarded their high or low alphabetical placement on ballots of twenty or thirty names was an advantage and direct personal assistance and endorsement by present or former board members seemed to be most effective for some winners.

Most candidates seemed to act as their own campaign manager although it should be noted that six of them did have someone to manage their campaign. The amount of money spent on the campaign ranged from a low of $250 to a high of $2500 with more than ninety percent of the winners spending between $600–800. The bulk of the money seemed to have been spent on brochures, lawn signs, and newspaper advertisements.

Because the three-week timeframe between the closing of nominations and election day is so short, the winning candidates commented that they spent virtually all of their free time campaigning and several of them took a leave from their jobs in order to organize and run the campaign. After one year as novice board members, seventy percent were certain they would run again in the 1985 elections, the remainder were uncertain, but none indicated that they would not run for re-election.

Part II: Election Promises

When the incumbents were asked to state their election promises, the majority of them (70%) mentioned their intention to improve the quality or raise the standard of education in the schools if they were elected. This promise seemed to correlate with most brochures and media advertising. Emphasis on the "basics", support for more compulsory subjects in the secondary school curricular reorganization, and "good Catholic education" in the Roman Catholic separate schools were ways in which the new board members would raise standards and achieve a higher quality of education.

The second most popular promise corresponded to the previous survey (Jakes, 1983) which was conducted in November, 1982 where the majority of new candidates for school board listed "a lack of communication between the schools or the board and themselves as parents or ratepayers" (p.21) as the principal reason why they ran for office. Included in this promise were improvements to all aspects of internal and external communications by the board. This improved communication promise was made by fifty percent of the winning candidates.

Responsible budgeting, including a fiscal restraint, was the third most popular promise. Thirty percent of the incumbents had stressed either a minimal tax increase or a lowering of taxes and others a "tightening up" of expenditures. The promise to fight for fair funding for Catholic education was a promise made by most separate school candidates. Other promises were basically local or individual in nature and included school closure and computer education among them. Of the twenty-one candidates interviewed, fifteen of them had put their election platforms in writing and most of the promises were reiterated verbally at community meet-the-candidates' meetings. The two board members who were acclaimed did not campaign but were prepared to outline their promises at all-candidates' meetings.

Most of the new board members perceived themselves as having some degree of success implementing their election promises. When this success was rated on a five-point scale, eleven percent indicated complete success. Only a small percentage of their promises appeared to achieve no success and these were mostly issues of a personal concern. With respect to the promise of improving communication, it is interesting to note that since the election in November 1982, the four school boards all now have a public relations office. All school boards seem to be making attempts to create parent advisory committees or at least to develop mechanisms whereby community concerns can be communicated directly to the board members.

Of more interest in this section of the interview, were the factors which were perceived to be instrumental in the successful implementation of their promises. Highest on the list were personal initiatives and the support of other board members. These were closely followed by support from the administration, political popularity of the issues, and the novices' familiarity with board pro-

cedure and decision making. Single interest group backing and issues which were already on the board agenda were perceived as being of lesser importance to their success and as a possible factor contributing to a lack of success in achieving their goals. The media was perceived by almost seventy-five percent of the respondents as having no bearing on their success and only partially responsible for their lack of success.

Part III: Socialization

As novice role incumbents during their first year in office, all of the respondents reported that they contributed to board discussions at least some of the time and forty-three percent indicated that they contributed regularly. Of the twenty-one respondents, eighteen of them agreed that they meet informally with other board members to discuss issues and agenda items. When asked if they ever telephoned experienced board members to discuss issues and to seek information regarding procedures, sixty-two percent agreed that they do this at least some of the time. Very few, however, meet socially with their colleagues on the board.

All of the new board members serve on at least three board committees and more than one-half of them (57%) serve on five or more. All of the novices commented that administration is represented on all of the board committees and seemed to be active participants most of the time with eighty-six percent of the respondents recognizing administrator participation in the discussions as being regular. Most novices (84%) felt that they work well, or very well, with their colleagues and the administration. The new board members believed themselves to be most effective working on regular standing or ad hoc committees and average or just above average in effectiveness during regular board meetings and private sessions.

The majority of role incumbents indicated that they aligned themselves regularly with other board members when votes were taken on specific issues and all of them reported that they were in general agreement with colleagues most of the time. They seemed to have learned quickly concerning the need for colleague support and many commented on the political necessity of trading votes and the use of other bargaining techniques in order to get motions passed. Twenty of the twenty-one (95%) answered emphatically that they do not accept the chief executive office's recommendations as being always the best and many of them went on to explain, that even though the director of education is the education expert at the board table, they feel that he is not always right, often does not understand the feelings of the parents and ratepayers, and on occasion, needs to be reminded that political decisions and policy-making activities are the function of the board and not the administration.

Most novices (76%) said that they do not publicly criticize fellow board members and indicated that they would rather speak to the issues and save any critical comments for later private conversations with the colleague involved. Only four of the new board members felt that they had been criticized or sanctioned by other colleagues during their first year in office. Perhaps there is a "honeymoon" feature to first year incumbency and one wonders if these feelings will be maintained during the three years of service particularly as the time for re-election draws closer. The only sanctions they seem to have experienced during their first year took the form of some verbal public criticism or a feeling of being ignored by fellow board members. Their reactions to these sanctions were reported as anger and defensiveness.

All of the respondents viewed corporate unity as being important and they believed that once a decision had been reached, all members should put aside personal preferences and support the decision. An appearance of unity between the board and the administration was viewed as being important by a majority (81%) and believed that the concept should be promoted whenever and wherever possible. When asked how corporate unity and cohesiveness could be achieved, the respondents felt that courtesy and shared values were most important (81%), personal satisfaction in the role of board member and adjustment to role expectations were very important (62%), and reciprocity of support among the members was also considered a priority (57%).

Part IV: Communication

Communication and personal contact with one's community was the most important factor for new board members. In order of importance, they cited parent advisory groups, public meetings, the telephone, neighbours, and the media as effective means. With respect to contact with other elected municipal officials, four respondents indicated there was none, five had limited contact at public meetings, and only three had any kind of personal communication with them. Even less contact was made with ministry officials or provincial members of parliament as only four novices had any communication with them and the remainder none at all. One-half of the respondents had direct contact with special interest groups, six had some contact by serving on joint committees, and only one had some contact during the campaign. Other means of maintaining contact with the public were reported as general visibility (38%), membership in associations and clubs (25%) and association with the clergy (13%), the latter being of particular importance for separate school board members.

When a question was posed asking how communication with the public could be improved, the responses in order of frequency were: educating the public concerning issues; hiring public relations specialists; encouraging the public to attend board meetings; keeping more discussion in the open; publicizing the issues in the media; encouraging groups to present concerns during the public question period; and publicizing board meetings. The

novice board members did concede, however, that there appeared to be a considerable amount of public apathy with respect to school board matters even though school boards spend the highest percentage of money collected from municipal taxation. When asked how communication with parents could be facilitated, a majority of the respondents favoured parent-board liaison committees, utilization of newsletters, writing articles for community newspapers, and greater visibility of the board member at community functions.

CONCLUSION

The successful candidates for school board in the November, 1982 election appeared, as a group, to be extremely well-organized, willing to spend sufficient monies on the campaign to get elected, wise enough to seek advice from experienced campaigners, astute in isolating primary strategic factors instrumental in winning, and knowledgeable about education and current issues. It seemed that their candidacy had been intended well in advance and, therefore, was well planned. There was high motivation to be a board member, and they knew what to attack and what to support to get elected. They were winners.

Although the promises that they made to the electorate concerning quality education, improved communication, and fiscal responsibility could be characterized as "motherhood" issues, it apparently was what the electorate wanted to hear and the promises were general enough that all of the novices were able to demonstrate that they had had success in the implementation of some improvement in each area. Their intelligence concerning the need to obtain support from colleagues and the administration, making certain their promises were politically popular, and exercising personal initiative to learn board procedures and how decisions are made seemed amazing.

It would appear that the socialization process with respect to role incumbency is well advanced even after only one year in office. Because most of the new candidates were extremely knowledgeable concerning educational issues and many were influenced in their recruitment by direct educational links (Jakes, 1983, p.20), the process had probably begun long before their election. According to the data, the role incumbents became quickly involved in the life of the board by their service on committees, participation in discussions, and regular consultation with experienced colleagues concerning procedures, policies and issues. They were most successful working on committees, considered themselves capable of making informed decision, and they were willing to promote corporate unity when decisions by the board had been made. Very few of them had been criticized or sanctioned by other board members and they seemed to agree that any intra-organizational criticism should be restricted to non-public arenas. Conceptually, it would appear that role socialization by their colleagues, involvement in board matters, group cohesion, and corporate unity with administration were progressing rapidly after only one year. When all but one novice indicated that they do not regularly accept the chief executive officer's recommendations, it could be concluded that new board membrs are either very sophisticated with respect to the process of administration socialization or that it may take longer for the administration to socialize them into the role which they expect board members to perform.

New school board members seem to become politically astute very quickly and soon realize that one of their primary tasks is to be re-elected. It was not surprising to find that the respondents were well aware of the community as their electorate and the need to place a high priority on communication with them. It was also evident that visibility by the public was essential and that accessibility to the electors was paramount to improve communication. They were also concerned about public apathy and an urgent need to educate the public with respect to the issues. It was also apparent by the lack of contact with other municipal and provincial politicians and officials that school board members often work in isolation from them, receive little recognition from the public, and need to possess considerable dedication toward their task of community service. It should be interesting to re-visit these novice school board members upon conclusion of their first three-year term, to ask them many of the same questions, and to determine if their attitudes towards their role has changed.

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